

# **COLOMBIA'S THREE WARS: U.S. STRATEGY AT THE CROSSROADS**

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**March 5, 1999**

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The authors appreciate the constructive comments and insights of Ambassador David Passage, Harry O'Harrar, Richard Downes, Caesar Sereseres, General (Retired) Fred Woerner, and Major General Robert Scales.

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## FOREWORD

Colombia is the most troubled country in the Western Hemisphere. Drug criminals, guerrillas, and paramilitary groups are feeding a spiral of violence that makes "colombianization" a metaphor for a failing state. This monograph, by Dr. Gabriel Marcella and Dr. Donald Schulz, addresses the strategic dimensions of the crisis. It argues that Colombia's future deeply affects regional security and U.S. interests. The country's afflictions are spilling over its borders, threatening Venezuela, Panama, Ecuador, Brazil, Peru, Mexico, and the Caribbean. At the same time, Colombia is the origin of most of the cocaine and heroin entering the United States. The fear is that, if the situation continues to worsen, the country may become balkanized, with large areas under the *de facto* control of guerrilla and paramilitary regimes based, in large part, on narco-economies.

U.S. policy is now at a critical juncture. A decision has been made to become more engaged in the war against narcotrafficking. Yet, the question remains: Can counternarcotics be separated from counterinsurgency? The authors believe that it cannot—that everything is related to everything else—and that unless the Colombian and U.S. governments address the problem through the creation of a coherent, holistic strategy, the situation will become much worse. In the latter half of their report, they discuss both the military and nonmilitary components of such a strategy. Among other things, they contend that restrictions on U.S. police training and counterinsurgency assistance should be removed or revised in order to enable the Colombian security forces to halt the momentum of the insurgents and paramilitaries and give them incentives to negotiate seriously. They also argue that a respect for human rights is of strategic importance.

The Strategic Studies Institute is pleased to publish this monograph as a contribution to the growing national security debate on this important issue.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF THE AUTHORS

GABRIEL MARCELLA is Professor of Third World Studies with the Department of National Security and Strategy, U.S. Army War College. He served as International Affairs Advisor to the Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Southern Command, Panama, 1987-89. Dr. Marcella has written extensively on strategy, low-intensity conflict, and Latin American policy. His writings have appeared in numerous journals and in various edited volumes. His most recent works include *Warriors in Peacetime: The Military and Democracy in Latin America; War and Peace in the Amazon: Strategic Implications for the United States and Latin America of the 1995 Ecuador-Peru War*; and *The Presidential Advisory System and the Making of Latin American Policy*. He is coauthor/coeditor of the forthcoming book, *Security Cooperation in the Western Hemisphere: Resolving the Ecuador-Peru Conflict*.

DONALD SCHULZ is the Strategic Studies Institute's expert on Latin American affairs. He has lived and traveled extensively in the region. Prior to joining SSI in 1991, he taught at several colleges, most recently Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago. He has coauthored or edited several books including *Mexico Faces the 21st Century; The United States, Honduras, and the Crisis in Central America; Cuba and the Future: Revolution and Counterrevolution in Central America and the Caribbean*; and *Political Participation in Communist Systems*. He has also published many journal and newspaper articles on Latin American politics, and testified before the Senate on U.S. policy in Haiti. Dr. Schulz's current research focuses on Mexico, Colombia, and Haiti. He holds a B.A. in Political Science from Wake Forest College and a Ph.D. in Political Science from Ohio State University.





**Map of Colombia.**

# **COLOMBIA'S THREE WARS: U.S. STRATEGY AT THE CROSSROADS**

The biblical holocaust that has been consuming Colombia for more than twenty years.

Gabriel García Márquez  
Colombian novelist

## **Introduction.**

Gabriel García Márquez's version of the biblical holocaust, Colombia's bloody internal strife, deeply affects the United States and the regional community of nations. Colombia is the most troubled country in the Hemisphere. Law and order have broken down. Drug criminals, guerrillas, and paramilitary "self-defense" organizations are feeding a spiral of violence and corruption that makes "colombianization" a metaphor for a failing state. Every day, about 10 Colombians are killed in politically related strife, while 85 percent of the 30,000 annual homicides are caused by pervasive criminal violence.<sup>1</sup> More than 1.3 million people have been displaced by war. To some, the country appears beyond redemption. Mindful of this challenge, the U.S. Army War College, on December 10-11, 1998, conducted the international conference "Landpower and Ambiguous Warfare: The Challenge of Colombia in the 21st Century" to better define the problems and propose constructive measures to assist this democracy in distress. Some of this monograph is based on the conference proceedings.

Colombia's problems are analyzed within the framework of U.S. national interests and policy. The authors believe that current policy, dominated by counternarcotics, is at a decisive juncture. The complexity and interrelatedness of Colombia's three wars and the priority need of reestablishing governmental authority and control over

territory and population now under both narcotrafficker and insurgent influence argue for a more comprehensive and visionary response. But a combination of prudence and timidity, the product of ghosts from the past (counter-insurgency and police training in Latin America), a programmatic approach driven by scarce resources, and the fact that Colombia's three wars are intimidatingly complex, inhibits American policy.

Colombia also presents to the United States the strategic dilemma posed by ambiguous warfare: how to adapt its political, economic, and military instruments to assist a nation confronted by three interrelated forms of internal violence that have deep international implications and whose elimination will take a long time. Indeed, strategic adaptation of the kind that Colombia demands will be a challenge for the United States in the 21st century. Accordingly, greater clarity of purpose is in order as the United States and Colombia deepen a relationship whose future is uncertain. The purpose of this essay is to clarify the issues and generate a responsible dialogue on the strategic alternatives.

### **Colombia's Three Wars.**

Colombia is a large country, three times the size of Montana and slightly less than France, Germany, and Italy combined. It fronts both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean. Seventy-five percent of its 37 million people live in urban areas. Population growth in 1997 was 1.9 percent. Its \$89 billion gross domestic product places it in the middle of the major economies in Latin America, though like most countries in the region, income distribution is highly skewed. About 50 percent of its people live in poverty, with 20 percent in absolute poverty. Gross domestic product growth for the economy averaged 4.1 percent from 1990 to 1997. In a nation of abundant resources and land, 10 percent of the owners possess 90 percent of the cultivable land.

The vast majority of the population occupies the one-third of the country framed by the Andean vertebrae. Its large eastern region, where guerrillas and narco-traffickers operate with impunity, is lightly populated and poorly controlled by the central government. Indeed, integration of Colombia's many regions into a coherent nation-state has been the principal challenge since independence. It is even more so now. Preston James, the eminent geographer, has written: "It would be difficult to conceive of a geographic pattern of internal arrangement that would appear to make the achievement of political unity and coherence more difficult than in Colombia."<sup>2</sup> Lack of government control makes large parts of the country particularly conducive to narcotrafficking and guerrilla insurgency.

Today Colombia is being torn apart by three simultaneous wars: the violence and corruption generated by drug traffickers, insurgents, and paramilitary organizations (which in 1998 accounted for more than 70 percent of all political killings). Over 35,000 people have been killed in these conflicts during the last decade. The rate of killing in Colombia far exceeds the amount of ethnic cleansing that went on after the breakup of Yugoslavia. Both the paramilitaries and the guerrillas take over areas and displace thousands of people. The nation's capacity to deal with this turmoil has been sharply declining, due to the weakening of most state institutions and the fragmentation of the social fabric. One scholar, Nazih Richani, refers to Colombia as a self-perpetuating "war system" that is practically unbreakable.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Eduardo Pizarro of the National Autonomous University of Colombia, refers to the "partial collapse of the state."

Yet, there is hope. In October 1997, 10 million Colombians went to the polls for mayoral elections and a national referendum to reject violence and criminality. In August 1998 the Andrés Pastrana administration came into office, with renewed domestic and international legitimacy and support from the United States and the democratic

community of nations. This was something that Washington had been reluctant to give to the previous Ernesto Samper government because the president had received campaign money from drug traffickers. Washington's distancing, which included denying him a visitor's visa to enter the United States and decertifying Colombia twice for not meeting Clinton administration criteria in the fight against drugs, was counterproductive because it weakened the country's institutional capacity in the face of the three wars. The upshot was that the enemies of democracy were emboldened, and Colombia fell further into the abyss.

President Pastrana quickly opted to open a peace process with the guerrillas, which commenced in January 1999. His top priority is to end the 34-year guerrilla war. Proclaiming that "For peace I risk everything," he agreed to the demand of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias Colombianas (FARC) to withdraw all government troops from an area of 16,000 square miles (the size of Switzerland and containing 96,000 people) controlled by the insurgents. The other insurgent group, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), would make a similar demand in February 1999. This recalls a previous peace process between 1989 and 1994, when some 5,300 guerrillas surrendered their arms and were reintegrated into society. Pastrana's controversial measure was seen as a bold stroke to strengthen the government's credibility and legitimacy for the peace negotiations ahead. Some observers, however, were worried that it would enhance the FARC's position by legitimating their *de facto* control of territory.

In November 1998, the U.S. Congress voted \$165 million in supplemental counternarcotics assistance which, added to \$124 million appropriated earlier, makes Colombia the third largest recipient of annual U.S. aid in the world. The following month, Secretary of Defense William Cohen and his counterpart Minister of Defense Rodrigo Lloreda signed an agreement in Cartagena for closer cooperation and U.S. military assistance to help the police and special army units

in the effort to eradicate illicit crops and deter the drug traffickers. In a significant development, Colombia will form an air mobile army battalion to assist in the counternarcotics effort.

## **The Strategic Imperative: Why Colombia Matters.**

Defining U.S. national interests in the Western Hemisphere in the post-Cold War era is doubly challenging. Gone are preoccupations about the threat to U.S. military security from the other superpower or its regional accomplices. The strategic environment is far more complex and variegated, and the threats are more systemic and long term. The East-West framework has given way to a more differentiated and mutually satisfying global agenda, which stresses the common goals of democratic governance, judicial reform, free trade, economic modernization, the fight against terrorism and transnational crime, and protection of the environment. The Miami Summit of 1994 and the Santiago Summit of 1998 advanced a common agenda, targeting the year 2005 for the establishment of a Free Trade Area of the Americas. Similarly, the President's 1998 National Security Strategy stresses the community of interests and convergence of values between the United States and the countries of the Western Hemisphere (except for Cuba).

Some might argue that defining U.S. national interests too broadly and inclusively in the post-Cold War is unsustainable. Such a definition, they argue, would not be credible to the American people. By so doing, any difficulties that arise may be seen as threats to U.S. security. But a narrow definition would obscure the obvious long-term linkages that exist between the core interests: national defense, economic well-being, international order, the promotion of democratic and humanitarian principles, and protection of the environment. Colombia's travails do not affect the military defense of the United States. But they powerfully influence the balance of values that makes the

United States a healthy and vibrant society, and the indispensable power in a global environment fraught with new threats to international order and human decency. They also deeply affect the security and well-being of countries in the region, many of which are far more vulnerable than the United States. With these caveats in mind, the authors believe that unless national interests are broadly defined, the U.S. policy response, however intelligent and well thought out, will be at best insufficient.

The very weakness of Colombia as a nation-state threatens international order in the region and the well-being of any number of countries. Its turmoil spills over into Venezuela, Panama, Ecuador, Brazil, Peru, the Caribbean, Central America, and Mexico. The threat takes different forms in different countries: extra-judicial killings, paramilitary activity, displaced people fleeing violence, drug trafficking, money laundering, kidnapping, illegal arms trafficking; corruption of government officials, policemen, military, the news media, judges, and other officers of the court; illegal immigration, ecological damage (from precursor chemicals and defoliants, oil spills from sabotaged pipelines, and the cutting of the tropical forest), and economic distortions caused by quick and unaccounted movements of capital. This melancholy brew weakens the societal will to resist the breakdown of order and security. Indeed, one of the cardinal objectives of the U.S. National Security Strategy, the strengthening of democracy, is under assault because of the corrosive influence of drug money.

### **The Stakes for the United States: Trade, Investment, and People.**

In 1997 Colombia accounted for \$11.6 billion in two-way trade with the United States. The latter provided 47 percent of the country's imports and is the top investor, accounting for 44 percent of foreign direct investment. Colombia is the fifth largest market for U.S. goods in Latin America, with 400 of the Fortune 500 companies doing business there.<sup>4</sup> It is already the fifth largest supplier of foreign oil, and has the

potential to play a considerably larger role if it can free itself from the guerrilla violence that is inhibiting the development of the industry. Over a million Colombians are in the ethnic tapestry of the United States, as are some 35,000 Americans who reside and work in Colombia.

## **The Impact of Drug Trafficking on American Society.**

Seventy percent of the cocaine entering the United States originates from Colombia, amounting to 300 metric tons with a street value of \$30 billion. In addition, 75 percent of the heroin seized by U.S. authorities on the East Coast is Colombian. The magnitude of the problem is such that drug consumption caused 100,000 deaths in the last decade. There are 13.9 million drug users and 3.6 million addicts in the United States. The total societal cost is estimated at \$300 billion annually from lost productivity, crime, policing, incarceration, rehabilitation, insurance and hospital care.<sup>5</sup> A large portion of the U.S. prison population is accounted for by drug-related crimes. According to the Department of Justice, seven out of ten people in jail have been drug users.

Colombia produces 80 percent of the world's cocaine and now grows more coca than any other country, having overtaken Peru and Bolivia. Coca production appears to be consolidating in Colombia, since production in Peru is down 56 percent since 1995 and in Bolivia 17 percent since 1997.<sup>6</sup> According to Thomas J. Umberg and Allison Major from the Office of National Drug Control Policy, most of the increase in cultivation in 1998 occurred in areas controlled by guerrillas. Such evidence confirms the existence of the narco-guerrilla as well as the narco-paramilitary nexus. As will be seen later, narcotics now provides a major source of income for guerrilla military operations. (Incidentally, Colombia now grows the high-yield Peruvian coca variety.) The narcos create another distortion also. According to Gustavo Gallón, Director of the Colombian Commission of Jurists, an estimated 40 percent of the land within the

agricultural frontier of the country is in the hands of traffickers converted into landowners.<sup>7</sup>

## **Democracy and Human Rights.**

Colombia is one of the oldest democracies in the Hemisphere. But it is not a strong participatory democracy with institutions that effectively mediate conflict and channel citizen demands to the national government.<sup>8</sup> The Liberal and Conservative parties alternated in the monopoly of power from 1958 until 1974, each running the national government for 4 years. This pragmatic accommodation (the National Front) helped end the post-1948 *La Violencia*, but it also closed “political participation to groups and sectors who did not feel they were represented” by the two parties.<sup>9</sup> From 1985 to 1990, states former Foreign Minister and presidential candidate Noemí Sanín, Colombia “experienced 5 years of systematic elimination of leaders, members and movements of these trends.”<sup>10</sup> In the 1990 presidential campaign, three candidates not representing the bipartisan system were assassinated.

Defective democracy has many manifestations. The judicial system is weak, despite the fact that Colombia allocates the second highest percentage (4.62) of the national budget to the judicial system in Latin America and probably employs the highest number of judges of any democracy, 17.1 per 100,000 people (in comparison: the United States has 2; Spain, 3).<sup>11</sup> Corruption permeates the political culture.<sup>12</sup> In this environment, public officials, including judges, prosecutors, investigators, and lawyers are widely subjected to the temptations of dishonesty. Some members of Congress have been so corrupted or intimidated by the narcotraffickers that they attempt to weaken or defeat legislation aimed at strengthening the government’s ability to deal with drug trafficking.

In addition, Colombia is one of the most violent countries in the world. It is the leader in kidnappings, registering

1,678 in 1998.<sup>13</sup> The antikidnapping police and military rescued 451 victims in 1998, preventing total ransom payments of \$52.2 million. Among those targeted for murder are human rights activists, leftists, former guerrillas who were "reinserted" into society (some 3,000 were murdered from the period 1989 to 1994), and former public figures. Between 1987 and 1992 there were 77 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, by far the highest rate in the world. Prominent victims killed in the last decade have included:

- Presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán
- Minister of Justice Rodrigo Lara Bonilla
- Diane Turbay, daughter of former President Julio César Turbay and director of a major Colombian television news show
- Carlos Pizarro, leader of the M-19 former guerrilla movement
- Guillermo Cano, editor of *El Espectador* newspaper
- Colonel Jaime Ramírez, first Director of the Colombian Anti-Narcotics Police
- Bernardo Jaramillo, of the Patriotic Union, a movement close to the Communist Party
- Dozens of judges and prosecutors
- At least 2,000 labor union members since 1991

In short, the human rights situation is appalling. The annual U.S. Department of State Human Rights Reports, which are mostly based on reporting by Colombian organizations, paint a pessimistic picture.<sup>14</sup> For the period 1993-98, the Colombian Commission of Jurists and human rights groups indicated that security forces, paramilitary groups, and the guerrillas were involved in political killings

(in addition to forced disappearances, and social cleansing against drug addicts, prostitutes, beggars, transvestites, and street children) according to the following percentages:

	Security Forces	Paramilitary	Guerrillas
1993	54	18	28
1995	16	46	38
1996	18	46	36
1997*	7.5	69	23.5
1998*	2.7 (21)	76 (573)	21.3 (160)

\* First nine months. Figures not available for 1994. These statistics may contain serious imprecisions because it is difficult to separate political from non-political killing.

In May 1998, the Army's 20th Military Intelligence Brigade was disbanded because personnel had been involved in human rights violations. The State Department also reports that the paramilitaries engage in active depopulation measures that force people to move to safer areas. The Colombian Commission of Jurists estimates that the rate of impunity for violations by the military, guerrillas, and paramilitaries is virtually 100 percent.<sup>15</sup>

## **The Guerrillas.**

The guerrillas number about 20,000 and comprise the FARC, the ELN (reputed to have 5,000 fighters), and the much smaller EPL (Popular Liberation Army). They operate in more than 100 separate "fronts" (upwards of 67 for the FARC, and 35 or so for the ELN) and exercise significant influence over 50 percent of the nation's 1,071 municipalities. On the eve of the 1997 election, they targeted political office holders, candidates, and election workers as valid military targets.<sup>16</sup> Their purpose was to discourage participatory democracy, destabilize the country, and delegitimize the government. In the process, they killed more than 200 candidates and elected officials and forced more than 2,000 candidates to withdraw. During the first nine months of 1997, guerrillas committed 23.5

percent of all politically motivated killings and more than 50 percent of reported kidnappings.

Founded in the mid-1960s, the Marxist-Leninist FARC and ELN expanded significantly in the 1980s. The most important reason for the FARC's growth was the development of a stable and lucrative source of financing its activities—the drug trade—by extracting protection money from coca growers and the operators of clandestine landing fields and laboratories, along with kidnapping. The ELN received new life by extorting money from oil companies operating the Caño Limón-Coveñas pipeline connecting Arauca province to the Caribbean. From 1986 to 1997 there were nearly 79 million barrels of crude oil spilled in pipeline attacks. Damage and lost revenue were estimated at \$1.5 billion, while the oil spills seriously damaged the ecology. Between 55 to 70 percent of the guerrilla war chest comes from extortion and protection of drug activities, according to former Defense Minister Rafael Pardo.<sup>17</sup> He argues further that extortion has changed the nature of the guerrillas, making them more like large criminal enterprises. Moreover,

While their leaders and declared political platforms continue to be superficially revolutionary, their purposes are changing. From their declared objective in the 1960s, which was the seizure of national political power by arms, they have evolved toward less lofty goals: local power for the ELN, coalition government for the FARC.<sup>18</sup>

In early 1999, however, the FARC vowed to return to the battlefield if the peace talks do not bring them to power and a socialist state.

While their political support has been declining in the last decade, the insurgents constitute a formidable military threat. Though they cannot now take power, they have operational momentum. They can feed the "war system" and maintain a costly stalemate indefinitely. In 1998, they displayed their growing military capability. For example, in early March the FARC decisively defeated troops of the

army's elite mobile counterinsurgency brigade at the battle of El Billar. David Spencer, a respected analyst of the Colombian Army, called this the most humiliating defeat to date because, for the first time, the guerrillas had defeated a large unit in maneuver warfare. The FARC military strategy appears to be to attack troops and police in remote and vulnerable positions, a pattern repeated at the brutal October 1998 attack on the police garrison at Mitú (a target that had no strategic significance to the FARC other than its psychological impact), deep in the Amazon Basin near the Brazilian border. These were serious defeats for the government, which does not have the forces, intelligence, and quick reaction mobility to respond across the vast distances of Colombia.

What cannot yet be determined is whether the guerrillas are serious about the peace process that began in January 1999. Some observers believe they are not. They argue that the insurgents have a vested interest in the continuation of the "war system": after all, it provides them with an enormous source of revenue through the protection of coca growers and drug traffickers, something they would presumably have to surrender in the event of a peace settlement. Skeptics also contend that the insurgents are winning the war, and consequently have no reason to compromise. If these arguments are correct, negotiations will be little more than a convenient tactical ploy. They will provide the rebels with a cloak of legitimacy and enable them to garner international support while consolidating control over territories and preparing for the option of intensifying the fighting in the future.

Current estimates are that neither side can win a military victory, and there are substantial costs and risks involved in a prolongation and escalation of the conflict. Such a scenario could well draw the United States into a more direct security assistance role for counterinsurgency (such as equipment and training), much as it was pulled into the Central American conflicts in the 1980s. If that happens, the likely result would be a strengthening of the

Colombian military and the creation of a hurting stalemate, where neither side could beat the other. Thus it might be in the guerrillas' interest to negotiate now, while they are in a relatively strong bargaining position, rather than later when the balance of military power has been redressed. By the same token, one should not dismiss the factor of fatigue. The war has been going on for decades. The insurgents are paying an increasingly heavy price, especially from the attacks launched by the growing paramilitary organizations. Finally, it is not really known how much the FARC and ELN would be hurt from a loss of drug revenues. Some observers believe their intake is much less than the Colombian military contends. If they are correct, the rebels might be willing to come to a peace agreement, particularly if the government were willing to address some of their political, social, and economic demands, such as agrarian reform and rural development.

## **The Paramilitaries.**

Many paramilitaries originated as self-defense organizations because of the need to provide security against the guerrillas in the absence of law and order. Paramilitaries (of which the largest group is the Autodefensas Campesinas of Córdoba and Urabá, the Peasant Self-Defense of Córdoba and Urabá) now constitute a serious threat to both the rule of law and the guerrillas, often engaging in tit-for-tat reprisal strikes, with increasingly brutal consequences for noncombatants.<sup>19</sup> In fact, in this war without quarter, both the paramilitaries and guerrillas share a disquieting tendency to consider "legitimate military targets" people normally defined by the international laws of armed combat as *hors de combat*, noncombatants. The paramilitaries operate locally, regionally, and nationally under various commands. In 1997-98, they inflicted serious losses on the guerrillas and sympathizers, especially in the Magdalena Medio region. Some organizations also derive income from the drug trade in order to fund operations. The extent of such involvement is not certain, but it points out the

complex linkages that drug money can generate between political-ideological motivation and the need to fund substantial military operations on the part of both the guerrillas and the paramilitaries.

During the first 9 months of 1998, the paramilitaries committed an estimated 76 percent of all politically motivated extrajudicial killings, according to Colombian sources cited earlier. Some Colombian authorities, such as General Fernando Tapias, Commanding General of the Armed Forces, and General Rosso José Serrano, Director of the National Police, profess to see no difference between the paramilitaries and the guerrillas, regarding each as a threat to state authority. Others, such as some military commanders, take a live and let live attitude. Some regard the paramilitaries as allies in the war against the insurgents. Daniel García-Peña, the chief negotiator in the Peace Commission under the Samper administration, states that though it would be "barbaric" to grant political recognition to them, they must be included in the peace process via separate negotiations.<sup>20</sup> A minority of analysts, such as David Spencer, go further, regarding them as a potentially constructive element.<sup>21</sup> While criticizing their human rights violations, they argue that these groups are a reality that cannot be ignored. They have become a political force that the government must bring into the peace process.

## **The Narco Nexus.**

No discussion of Colombia's accelerating national disintegration would be complete without an appreciation of the role of narcotrafficking. Violence and corruption have always been a problem in Colombia, of course, as has the weakness of the state—its inability to command an effective presence—in rural areas. But the narcorevolution of the 1980s served as a catalyst for worsening these afflictions by channeling new resources (both financial and military) to old foes and creating new social sectors, which transformed

a polarized armed conflict between two sides into one in which multiple groups and sectors are armed.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, one of the root causes of paramilitary violence was a decade-and-a-half investment boom in agricultural lands by *nouveau riche* drug traffickers seeking to launder profits, accumulate wealth, and acquire social standing. Throughout the 1980s, these traffickers made huge investments in traditional areas of the Colombian countryside, largely in cattle ranches in the north and Atlantic coast regions and the central Magdalena River valley. There rural elites were abandoning their holdings in large numbers both because of the extortionary taxation and violence of the guerrillas and the willingness of the traffickers to pay in cash for choice but overvalued land. The upshot was that in the 1980s and early 1990s an estimated 5-6 million hectares fell into the hands of the drug lords.<sup>23</sup>

This was, in effect, an agrarian counterreform, which aggravated all of the traditional problems of rural inequality, land concentration and land poverty, and the class conflicts that accompany them. To consolidate their holdings in the face of the threats posed by disgruntled peasants and revolutionary guerrillas, the narcotraffickers allied themselves with local political bosses, other large landowners, and the armed forces. Most important, they sought to augment security by organizing their own private paramilitary units, which they used to cleanse their areas of the insurgents and their supporters. In this, they found a willing ally in the Colombian Armed Forces which, with little civilian government oversight, supported and trained these groups or acquiesced in their formation under the assumption that the paramilitaries were their natural allies in the war against the guerrillas. By the time it became clear that the paramilitaries could pose as great a threat to the state as the guerrillas, it was too late. The genie was out of the bottle.<sup>24</sup>

But the narcorevolution not only fueled paramilitary violence; it also fueled the insurrections. Out in the

colonization zones east of the Andes, the guerrillas were working closely with the small and medium-sized farmers who provided the raw coca for processing into cocaine. As with other businesses in areas under their control, they imposed revolutionary taxes on the growers, while charging traffickers fees for the protection of landing strips, crops, and processing facilities. When the heroin boom of the early 1990s hit, the insurgents benefitted from that also. Similarly, with the recent shift of coca farming from Peru and Bolivia to Colombia, the potential for revenue increased once again. Estimates of the guerrilla revenues from the drug business go as high as \$500-600 million annually. Table 1 depicts the nature of the guerrilla-narco relationship via the taxes imposed by the guerrillas.

Nevertheless, the precise nature of the rebels' relationship with the traffickers remains the subject of heated debate. The Colombian military has patented the term "narcoguerrilla" to suggest that the insurgents have become an international drug mafia. The claim is that the guerrillas now receive the bulk of their financing from the drug business. Other observers, however, believe these charges are exaggerated. Some argue that the military has a vested interest in magnifying the rebel involvement in order to lure the United States into expanding its military involvement. They point out that the guerrillas' drug revenues come largely from taxation on the least profitable sector of the business—farming; that apparently few rebel units are engaged in the actual cultivation of illegal crops; and that there is little, if any, involvement in the sale of these narcotics abroad (which is where most of the profits come from). Indeed, even some U.S. and Colombian government estimates suggest that only about 20 percent of the guerrillas are providing protection for drug processing facilities and farms. (Then again, illicit crops are not cultivated everywhere. But wherever the insurgents are present in drug-producing areas, they take advantage of the opportunity.) Recent reports that the FARC is still largely using old and improvised weapons and is increasingly

relying on forced conscription suggest that it is not as flush with drug money as is often claimed.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond this, it seems clear that the relationship between the FARC and the drug traffickers varies widely in different parts of the country. At the risk of oversimplification, it appears that where the guerrillas are strong, the narcos tend to acquiesce to their demands for taxes and protection money, rather than try to confront them. In contrast, where

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Quantity</b>
Coca crops production	Col \$100,000 monthly per hectare, U.S. \$100
Coca leaf production	Col \$1,000 per kilo, U.S. \$1
Coca leaf harvesting	Col \$500 per kilo, U.S. \$.50
Lab security	Col \$50,000 per kilo of coca base, U.S. \$50
	Col \$100,000 per kilo, pure cocaine, U.S. \$100
Clandestine airstrip control	Col \$18,000,000 per flight, U.S. \$18,000
Aircraft security	Col \$5,000,000, U.S. \$5,000
Chemical riverine transport	20 percent of shipment value
Poppy crop protection	40 percent of production
Morphine production	Col \$4,000,000 per processed kilo, U.S. \$4,000
Poppy harvesting	Col \$8,000,000 per processed kilo, U.S. \$8,000

\*Source: U.S. Department of State, "Narcotrafficking and Guerrilla Alliance, Colombia 1997," [www.usia.gov/abtusia/posts/COL/wwwgng97.gif](http://www.usia.gov/abtusia/posts/COL/wwwgng97.gif)

**Table 1.**  
**Narcotrafficking And Guerrilla Income, 1997\*.**

the FARC is weaker, the traffickers are more inclined to resist, supporting paramilitary forces to attack the insurgents.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, it must be noted that the paramilitaries and the guerrillas are not the only groups with ties to the traffickers. The latter have penetrated all branches of government, from the national level to the local. The case of Ernesto Samper (in which the former president accepted drug money for his presidential campaign) may be the most notorious instance, but it should not obscure the fact that dozens of congressmen have also accepted drug money in return for providing political protection for the mafias. Similarly, countless judges have released traffickers because of bribery or intimidation. Nor have military officers been exempt from such temptations. And as for the traffickers' economic connections, suffice it to say that their money goes everywhere. The Colombian economy is far more dependent on narcotrafficking than, for instance, Mexico's is.<sup>27</sup>

None of this suggests that the traffickers control the political system, any more than they can control the guerrillas or the paramilitaries (which are hardly monolithic in their origins or agendas). The wars the Colombian government waged and won against the Medellín and Cali cartels suggest the continuing ambivalent relationship that the traffickers have with all these political actors. They also suggest the difficulty in defeating the traffickers. Following the destruction of the giant cartels, the industry decentralized. Today, more coca is grown in Colombia than ever before, and at least as much cocaine, and increasingly heroin, is flowing to the United States. Which suggests that while mafias and their henchmen may come and go, the basic problem remains unresolved.

## **International Order and Regional Security.**

Colombia's agony deeply affects other societies, most notably Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, Panama, Mexico, and the Caribbean. The microstates of the Caribbean are especially vulnerable. In the words of the West Indian Commission:

Nothing poses greater threats to the civil society . . . than the drug problem, and nothing exemplifies the powerlessness of regional governments more. That is the magnitude of the damage that drug abuse and trafficking hold for our community. It is a many-layered danger. At base is the human destruction implicit in drug addiction; but implicit also is the corruption of individuals and systems by the sheer enormity of the inducements of the illegal drug trade in relatively poor societies. On top of all of this lie the implications for governance itself—at the hands of both external agencies engaged in international interdiction, and the drug barons themselves—the “dons” of the modern Caribbean—who threaten government from within.<sup>28</sup>

Neighboring Venezuela has a population of 3 million Colombians, the vast majority of whom came for jobs, while others are agents of corruption and violence. According to retired Venezuelan Air Force General Boris Saavedra, the FARC operates in an area along 2,100 kilometers of the border and engages in drug trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, bribery, contraband, money laundering, cattle rustling, and auto theft. In addition, guerrillas attack and harass Venezuelan police and military units.<sup>29</sup> Venezuelan police and military officials have developed extensive coordination with their Colombian counterparts to deal with these threats. The binational security agenda includes: fighting off the insurgents, denying them control of the border areas, checking continuing actions of drug mafias associated with them, dealing with the large number of undocumented immigrants, and mitigating rapidly progressive environmental degradation.

Ecuador, a transit country for cocaine, is haven to some 350,000 illegal Colombians. Some contribute to crime, such as kidnapping members of the business community for ransom. In 1995, the FARC attacked military and police units. Ecuadoran officials are concerned that an intensification of Colombia's internal wars, coupled with the failure of the peace process, could create a more serious threat because the Colombian Army might be forced to withdraw troops from border control missions.<sup>30</sup> The Putumayo region, which is adjacent to Ecuador, is a FARC stronghold. Ecuadorean authorities, therefore, also conduct extensive coordination with their Colombian counterparts.

Brazil shares a long and unpopulated border with Colombia. On November 1, 1998, 800 FARC guerrillas attacked the Colombian police garrison of Mitú (population 15,000), the capital of Vaupés state, located some 20 miles from the Brazilian border. Using homemade missiles constructed from modified gas cylinders, they killed some 60 policemen and seized the town and airport.<sup>31</sup> Government airborne reinforcements were forced to land inside Brazil, doing so without diplomatic clearance from the government of Brazil, in order to relieve the garrison and retake the city. Though there is informal local coordination between Colombian and Brazilian authorities on security matters, Brazil recalled its ambassador from Bogotá for consultations, a relatively timid measure that did little to secure the vast open spaces of the Amazon Basin.

This is merely one aspect of the impact on Brazil. Colombian traffickers are also developing ties with Brazilian criminal gangs. The brutal and indiscriminate attack on Mitú, which had stunning psychological impact nationally and internationally, was preceded by similar assaults in remote areas where the guerrillas have the operational advantage. Moreover, the vast unpopulated Amazon Basin, which is shared with five countries, facilitates the movement of drugs, contraband, and guerrillas. These countries have yet to work out a system of

bilateral and multilateral cooperation to deal with these security problems.

On February 7, President Alberto Fujimori of Peru announced that Peru would shift military forces formerly deployed along the Ecuadorian Border and build three air fields along the 1600 kilometers-long border with Colombia in order to stop the FARC and the drug traffickers from using the vast open Peruvian territory. Colombian authorities welcomed this assistance from their neighbor as an important step that would help remove sanctuaries for the guerrillas and traffickers. Days earlier in Washington, Fujimori had publicly criticized the Colombian government for giving legitimacy to the FARC via concession of the demilitarized zone and the negotiation process.

Panama's remote and jungle-covered Darién province is a case where the government exercises *laissez-faire* authority, according to Bertha Ramona Thayer.<sup>32</sup> FARC guerrillas and paramilitaries regularly cross over from the Chocó-Urabá region, conduct kidnappings, deal in contraband, and acquire arms and provisions to return to Colombia. It is doubtful that Panama can restore control over its eastern province. Drug money from Colombia deeply affects Panamanian life, from money laundering, to prostitution, large purchases of goods in the Colón Free Zone, illicit contributions to political campaigns, and small-time drug trafficking and associated crime.

Finally, Mexico is experiencing the complex process of "colombianization." This is defined by Raúl Benítez Manaut, of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, as:

The decisive influence on the economy of the profits made from cocaine sales, the penetration of the drug cartels in the political and judicial systems, the creation of a social base of support for the narcotrafficking, the permanent presence of armed groups of the left in control of rural areas, and finally the establishment of alliances between the guerrillas of the left and the traffickers. In sum, "colombianization" is the loss

of state sovereignty with respect to the control of territory, the economy, the social base of support, and the presence of armies autonomous from the state and with great firepower.<sup>33</sup>

Mexico is a transit area for Colombian drugs, and there is a tacit alliance between trafficker organizations of both countries.

### **The Reconstruction of Colombia: A Strategy for Generating Legitimate Power.**

Colombia faces an imposing set of challenges. To paraphrase U.S. Ambassador Myles R. Frechette, some of these only Colombia can deal with. For others, the United States and other countries can provide advice, specialized training, some of the material means, and international political support. But only Colombians can achieve the political will to make the necessary commitments, sacrifices, and reforms. The will to win is simply not exportable. A coherent national strategy is essential, one that establishes continuity and has broad political support. Strategy is the calculated relationship between ends and means. The ends are political objectives which are achieved by the intelligent application of programs and resources. Ends must be prioritized, synchronized, and articulated to the nation. The objectives of a national strategy for Colombia are formidable: reassert control over national territory, end the violence and corruption, and build an effective democracy.

Any strategy must establish legitimate and responsible governmental authority over territory and population. Legitimacy is defined as belief by the governed that the government has the right to govern. It is achieved through participatory elections and then sustained by effective governance. It is defended, when necessary, through the state's monopoly of force, but always ethically and in constrained manner. Colombia's very divisions are at the root of the failure to achieve a national consensus on strategy. What Colombia must do is daunting: it is nothing

less than the reconstruction of the nation. To do this, it must generate sufficient legitimate power and apply it effectively to establish public security, deter the criminality, and bring the guerrillas to the peace table for serious negotiations to end the fighting and rebuild the nation.

When societies reach rock bottom during internal war, there often emerges a general realization that commitments and sacrifices must be made. In recent years, Nicaragua, Argentina, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Peru have been through this process. At some point, the decisional elites develop the will to mobilize the ministries of government and generate the popular support to take on the challenges. At times, the armed forces have taken the leadership in this, though this is not the best way to proceed.

Caesar Sereseres, a leading authority on the lessons gleaned from internal wars, suggests that the experiences of other countries contain important lessons for Colombia.<sup>34</sup> Basing his argument on the experiences of Central America, Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines, he notes that successful cases possess similar strategic and operational characteristics:

- Civil authority took control and, in every case, the government went to war by mobilizing itself, not just the military;
- Counterinsurgency was not cheap; vast resources in people, money, equipment, and time were required;
- The military was reformed and restructured; in every case the army was reorganized; institutional reforms were critical, and in each case special operations forces were the cutting edge of the military effort;
- A national campaign plan was developed, with a strategy to separate the guerrillas from the population, defend the infrastructure, and attrit the insurgents;

- For the end game, what happens on the battlefield matters. If the army is not successful on the battlefield, it will affect the final result. In every case, the guerrillas had an end game. In most cases where the government defined that game in purely military terms, the government lost.

But Colombia is no ordinary country. There are few analogies to its three simultaneous wars, the level of corruption, institutional weaknesses, and to its formidable geography. Its insurgents, paramilitaries, and drug traffickers generate their own resources; there are few external supporters; geographic enclaves within the country afford the guerrillas and paramilitaries practical autonomy; and the United States exercises less leverage on the strategic balance and the government than it did in, say, Central America. Clearly, these problems must be resolved through the integrated application of all the instruments of national power. While military power is essential, it is not sufficient. Indeed, militarizing the effort may be a good indicator of continued failure.

Most of the policy relevant academic research on comparative lessons that might apply to Colombia have more to do with discrete parts, such as how to win the counterinsurgency, how to conduct peace negotiations with internal power contenders, and the reform of the military and the judicial system. There is little academic writing on how nations can be reconstructed after they begin falling apart (such as Colombia) or have failed altogether. An exception is the work of I. William Zartman. He maintains that the keys to reconstituting legitimate government and authority are: power, participation, resources, external assistance, and leadership.<sup>35</sup>

Colombia is nowhere near the failed state syndrome, but the five variables shed light on the task ahead. With respect to power, the 200,000 plus armed forces and police are duly constituted. Their task is to restore public security and governmental presence and control in the national

territory. It must include institutionalized participation by broad sectors of society, including constructive engagement by civil society, in order to legitimize the political system being restored. Resources need to be made available for reconstruction, to pay for the implementation of reforms, for the expanding personnel costs, for the expensive counterinsurgency, and the gamut of nation-building activities that reach the citizenry in order to restore confidence in the legitimacy of the government.

But power, participation, resources, and external assistance are irrelevant without the catalyst of leadership. It takes leadership to mobilize the finite resources, people, ministries, and organizations to sustain the effort for the long term. Zartman sums up the challenge:

Power, participation, resources are the ingredients behind this leadership process; unfortunately, there is no order of priority among them to prescribe. Elementary security must be restored, most basically through ceasefire; the national reconciliation must be begun, through informal negotiations and institutionalizing fora; resources must be secured and mobilized. . . . All of this must be done at once and at the same time, and the steps kept apace of each other as the process moves along. It must also be done with an end in view, as a process that combines order, legitimacy, and authority with policy, production, and extraction, rather than a series of discrete steps taken one . . . at a time. In addition, it must be done looking backward as well as forward, preparing the introduction of mechanisms that will prevent the new efforts from falling back. . . . It must be done with a keen sense of indigenous . . . ways of doing things, which can be the strongest allies of reconstruction efforts. . . . state restoration is an uphill challenge, not an automatic process. . . . It takes time. . . .<sup>36</sup>

## **The United States and Colombia: Ambiguous Warfare and Strategic Dilemmas.**

Uncertain of domestic support and skeptical about the Colombian government's capabilities and intentions, American officials are clearly anxious to draw limits on U.S. support and involvement. The country's ambiguous warfare

is exceedingly complex and difficult to understand. Though there seems to be more consensus in Washington on the threat, there are differences on the solutions, and whether the priority focus should be the counternarcotics effort, the counterinsurgency, or both simultaneously. Thus, it is not surprising that Phil Chicola, the State Department's Director of Andean Affairs, recently affirmed: "We are committed to maintaining a line between counternarcotics and counterinsurgency."<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Defense Secretary Cohen told his Colombian counterpart Rodrigo Lloreda that U.S. policy is driven by "self interest." In the same vein, Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics Matters and Legal Affairs R. Rand Beers stated that the "current consensus is to support a counternarcotics effort first."<sup>38</sup> Defense Minister Lloreda concurred that Colombia needs no help with the counterinsurgency.

According to Beers, the goals of U.S. counternarcotics policy are:

- Enhancement of the Government of Colombia's intelligence capability;
- Eradication of coca, amapola, and heroin, and development of alternative crops;
- Interdiction;
- Strengthening Colombian law enforcement agencies and the administration of justice.

Beers added that the policy represented a consensus within the U.S. Government that would be placed at risk if the United States were to attempt a counterinsurgency role. Chicola stated that the policy is one of enhanced engagement, with counternarcotics as the centerpiece, supplemented by support for the peace process with the insurgents, human rights, humanitarian relief and assistance, support for economic reforms, investments, and environmental concerns.

The credibility of the U.S. counternarcotics strategy depends on how it balances the effort to reduce supply in the countries of origin with the reduction of demand at home. Because it is the major consumer of illegal drugs, the United States accepts co-responsibility for the problem. Accordingly, the 1999 National Drug Control Strategy (and its annual predecessors) provides a comprehensive approach to stem domestic use, such as: greater public education, reducing the number of addicts, drug testing, treatment of prisoners, and securing the borders of the United States against drugs. Of course, demand reduction is a long-term generational effort.

There is agreement between Bogotá and official Washington that the primary threat is drugs, though some analysts believe that the guerrillas are the greater danger. Yet, the guerrillas challenge, if not supplant, governmental legitimacy, authority, and presence in large sections of the countryside. In short, the guerrillas feed on the government's military and institutional debilities to sustain war for the long term. Unless Colombia brings the insurgents to a negotiated end of the war, it may sink into the abyss of civil war. President Pastrana apparently believes that the guerrillas are a potential ally in the war against the narcotics. On January 5, 1999, he stated that the "first enemy of peace is narcotrafficking. If the FARC takes the decision to eradicate drug crops, they'll do it. Because they definitely have the influence to carry it out."<sup>39</sup> He added, however: "First they must denarcotize themselves." This is part of the rationale for the peace negotiations that were scheduled to begin January 7, 1999. The United States, it should be reiterated, is encouraging the peace process. At the same time, one must question whether the FARC is truly the champion of the people's cause if they continue to contribute to the downfall of Colombia via toleration and protection of the drug traffickers and their infrastructure of corruption and violence.

The trouble is that American reticence to get more deeply involved is well-founded. It is based on long

experience of providing assistance to friendly governments beset with internal war, fueled in part by high levels of corruption. El Salvador, a relative success story for U.S. policy and with no combat assistance from U.S. military forces, fought the insurgents to a negotiated peace. But it had a steep strategic learning curve. With American prodding and cajoling and the prudent application of significant leverage, El Salvador mobilized some political will and augmented its institutional capacities. Importantly, it made necessary fundamental political, economic, and social reforms, restructured its armed forces, and changed its military strategy to deal with the insurgents. Ultimately it went to the negotiating table at the very twilight of the Cold War, when the Soviet-Cuban-Sandinista support system came to an end.

But the learning process was messy and never linear, often involving considerable backsliding on the part of the ally in the field, notably in the area of human rights and the constrained use of force. Twelve years of strategic and operational learning were required before El Salvador's military and police forces could sway the tide against the guerrilla Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, a period which led to a huge human and material toll on the Salvadoran people but which, in the end, forced the guerrillas to agree to peace talks which ultimately succeeded. But El Salvador did not face the awesome menace of drug money feeding corruption, violence, and the guerrillas.

Thus, American caution on Colombia is understandable and prudent. The Colombian government has stated that it does not want U.S. counterinsurgency support. What Colombia needs, just like El Salvador did, is effective pressure to restructure and retrain its armed forces. Nonetheless, counternarcotics aid is a significant commitment that comes close to crossing the counterinsurgency line. The United States may have to cross the line, not with troops in active combat, but with training and equipment support for the military and police.

It may also be necessary for the most compelling reasons: to allow the Colombian government to be successful in combating the guerrillas and drug traffickers, regain control of its national territory, and thus end human rights abuses, including those committed by the armed forces, the guerrillas, and the paramilitaries.

Under these circumstances, the United States and Congress will expect Colombians to make the sacrifices required to succeed, and they will not support an unjust or unwinnable war. But how are we to determine justness in this kind of ambiguous warfare? Americans do so on the basis of the legitimacy granted to the government through democratic elections, and the rejection of illegal means in the use of force, whether on the part of the insurgents, the paramilitaries, or rogues in the military. Support will also be premised on the expectation that the government of Colombia will engage in a serious effort at winning and at national reconstruction. Accordingly, it must apply its legitimate authority and power effectively to regain territorial control and literally win “the hearts and minds of the people.” While many Colombian leaders recognize this need, the institutional and societal commitment has yet to be made. It may be that society will have to reach a higher threshold of pain before decisive action is taken.

### **Recovering the Legitimate Use of Force: Clausewitz and Colombia.**

The Commanding General of the Colombian Armed Forces, Fernando Tapias, asserted: “Unless the state recovers the legitimate use of force the country could well sink into civil war.”<sup>40</sup> The legitimate authority to have recourse to force should reside in the state. The insurgents and paramilitaries advance the principle that might makes right. Moreover, they conduct violence that negates the principles of just war by targeting noncombatants and by using means proscribed by international humanitarian law. The legitimate authority of the state to use the monopoly of

force has to be restored, but it must be done ethically and morally.

Three of Clausewitz's principles are especially useful for Colombia's strategic purposes: the center of gravity, knowing what kind of war you are engaged in, and the "remarkable trinity" of the people, armed forces, and government. The center of gravity for the government is its legitimacy: regaining the support of the people. The Colombian Army probably has been involved in more counterinsurgency warfare than any army in the world, but the fact remains that it has not been able to defeat the FARC and ELN and is currently performing badly. It will require extraordinary effort to wear down the guerrillas because counterinsurgency is indeed expensive in terms of time, resources, political endurance, and individual and institutional sacrifices.

At 146,300 troops, the armed forces may not be large enough, given the size and terrain of the national territory.<sup>41</sup> Conventional wisdom holds that a successful counter-insurgency requires a ratio of 10 soldiers to 1 guerrilla, though this is seldom achieved in the real world. Currently, only about 30,000 of Colombia's troops are being used for active military operations against the guerrillas. Even if the army were to achieve the 10 to 1 force ratio, it might still not be enough to "saturate" the country, to use the words of former Defense Minister Rafael Pardo. Unless effectively trained, organized, and deployed, it might simply create more lucrative targets for the guerrillas.<sup>42</sup> The low ratio can be somewhat compensated for by the use of force multipliers, such as greater mobility and better intelligence. However, in the fall of 1998 the military utilized only 20 helicopters, though it had access to over 100 more. In contrast, El Salvador had 60 helicopters and 60,000 troops in a territory 1/50 the size of Colombia. The military needs major improvements in intelligence collection, evaluation, and dissemination; close quarters combat, small unit operations, logistics administration and

support, lift capabilities, leadership training, civil and humanitarian operations, and human rights.

However tentatively, Colombia and the United States are deepening their relationship. Yet, it is uncertain how far this can go. The United States must communicate forcefully to the Colombians that they must make fundamental changes based on proven principles for this kind of ambiguous warfare. This includes: respect for human rights and justice; adapting the army to aggressive small unit operations by enhancing intelligence, mobility and quick reaction capabilities; and improved relations with the civilian population. Such professional training is available from U.S. Army Special Forces, as well as those of the Navy and Air Force.<sup>43</sup> The difficulties of getting such training through the U.S. political process would diminish if the Colombian government and the public security forces demonstrated that they can win the wars while respecting human rights.

These institutional improvements must be accompanied by careful cultivation of Clausewitz's "remarkable trinity." To be successful in war, the government, military, and people must have a trinitarian relationship of mutual support and cooperation. This relationship is the essence of the American military tradition. It originates from principles of democratic civil-military relations and civilian control of the military that were written into the Constitution by the founding fathers. Trinitarian strategy dominates the American approach to planning for war.

The absence of such a relationship is another indicator of Colombia's debility. Commenting on the weakness of civil-military relations, the respected former presidential candidate and Central Bank board member, María Mercedes Cuellar, commented that Colombia's institutions operate as isolated "castes" hermetically sealed from each other in defending their unique institutional interests.<sup>44</sup> Regarding military service, for example, high school graduates (some 35,000 *bachilleres* serving in the military)

are exempted from serving in combat units. (Shades of college deferments during America's debacle with a "class war" in Vietnam.) Moreover, one can buy freedom from military service. Thus, peasant soldiers fight against peasant guerrillas, while the middle and upper classes are spared the nastiness of war. Clearly, the sacrifices for using the armed power of the state to fight the traffickers, paramilitaries, and insurgents need to be borne more equitably. Until all sectors of society share the burden of war, they are likely to undervalue their stake in the end game. It will take time—perhaps even a generation—to inculcate such changes. But unless these commitments and fundamental reforms are made, the three wars will continue indefinitely.

Difficult as it sounds, the war must be humanized. This does not mean putting down weapons, however. Rather, it is the creation of a more professional military force, restructured and retrained, which would be able to take the offensive against guerrillas on the battlefield, thus giving them an incentive to negotiate seriously at the bargaining table. But turning the military institution around takes time, an asset that is diminishing for the government. Nonetheless, the outcome could be more humane in the form of limiting casualties, respecting the human rights of both combatants and noncombatants, and bringing the conflict to an earlier (rather than later) conclusion.<sup>45</sup> The United States has a lot of experience in teaching its military forces and those of other nations how to fight according to the humane considerations of the laws of armed conflict. It must help train Colombian forces in order to inculcate these values in their operations. This would be a powerful link for justifying to the American public and Congress appropriate levels of security assistance, which might be forthcoming only if Colombia wages war through just means (*jus in bello*). Along these same lines, the United States also needs to jettison its outmoded prohibition of police training assistance to Latin America.<sup>46</sup> Imparting the best of

American investigative and policing techniques can be a powerful force multiplier for democracy.

Returning to General Tapias's formulation, Colombia has the choice of generating legitimate power in order to pursue peace and reconciliation or attempting to impose order through the use of illegitimate power. The latter course may bring about civil war, while the former enhances the chances for peace. The broad alternatives are summarized below:

## **GENERATING STATE POWER**

<b>Legitimate</b>	<b>Illegitimate</b>
Inclusive democratic governance	Exclusive or "facade" democracy
Respect for human rights	Human rights violations
Accountability and impartial justice	Injustice and impunity
Civilian control of the military	Lack of control
Rules of engagement controlled by president as commander-in-chief	Autonomous and illegal operations
Constrained use of force	Arbitrary and disproportionate use
Respect for humanitarian considerations in military operation	Massacres, extrajudicial abuse and killings
Discrimination between combatants and noncombatants	Indiscriminate attacks
Effective public information program at home and abroad	Secretiveness and incompetence
Agrarian reform and rural development	Abandonment of peasants and rural areas
Colombian national effort	Dependence on external aid
Burdensharing by all sectors of society	Sacrifices made only by poor

The fact that the Army will establish an air mobile counternarcotics battalion is a critical step forward for two reasons. First, it shows greater commitment by the government to pursue drug trafficking. Second, by linking the unit's establishment with U.S. counternarcotics

assistance, it promises to create a new model of military professionalism that will have to adhere to U.S. human rights law in order to receive U.S. support. (The Leahy Amendment to the 1996 international affairs budget proscribes assistance to: "Any unit . . . if the Secretary of State has credible evidence to believe such unit has committed gross violations of human rights unless the Secretary determines and reports to the Committee on Appropriations that the Government of such country is taking steps to bring the responsible members of the security forces unit to justice.") It remains to be seen how this new battalion will operate with the police, what its mission will be, how it will be subordinated to command and control, and what its rules of engagement will be, and, ultimately, if it will make a difference. Nonetheless, the training and experience of an operationally effective counternarcotics battalion may have a positive professionalizing impact on the military while strengthening the support to the police if Colombia is to avoid becoming a "failed state," at war with itself and the region.

Colombia must also reconstruct its battered judicial system, where a mere 3 percent of those indicted are currently convicted. The issue of land distribution, a potent source of peasant discontent and fertile ground for guerrilla recruiting, must also be addressed. Here a promising tactic would be redistributing land now in the hands of narcotraffickers to peasants. This can also be a source of bargaining leverage in the peace negotiations with the insurgents, in addition to alternative crops, rural infrastructure projects, and marketing schemes. In sum, Colombia must maintain the moral high ground of legitimacy in order to win the support of its own people, as well as of the United States and other nations (especially the Europeans). But it should not continue to make the mistake of putting its armed forces and police out front without an effective national strategy that engages the efforts of all the ministries of government and all classes in society. The Pastrana administration is committed to peace

negotiations with the guerrillas. Through reforms and improved institutional capabilities, combined with superior professional performance on the battlefield, it can create a more promising environment for peace negotiations.

### **The Peace Negotiations Process.**

On January 7, 1999, President Pastrana made good on his promise to begin peace negotiations with the FARC. On that day he met with guerrilla leaders (except the 68-year-old Manuel Marulanda, "Tirofijo") in San Vicente del Caguán, in the demilitarized zone (*despeje*). Peace negotiations are fundamental for national reconciliation and further legitimize the reconstruction of state power. The first round of meetings was intended to test whether the political climate was conducive for putting substantive issues on the agenda. The process may take years before it yields positive results.

For the peace process to be successful, it needs to be accomplished by Colombians, who can take advantage of the advice, experiences, and support of other nations. It must include insurgents as well as the paramilitaries. (Whether the latter can be brought in as a formally recognized political force or will have to remain as unofficial participants will have to be worked out during the negotiations.) The armed forces must also be given an important role. To fortify the legitimacy of the judicial system, the issue of impunity must be faced head on. There can be no impunity for the drug traffickers. The issue of legal impunity for the insurgents and paramilitaries, both of whom have much blood on their hands, is a more complex question. Complete justice in a deeply torn society is impossible to achieve, and is potentially too divisive for the future of democracy. Numerous recent experiences around the globe, from Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Haiti, and South Africa to the reunification of West and East Germany, point to various forms of compromise for the greater good of a peaceful

future. Establishing a democratic community requires a determination of how far to go in punishing the guilty. The experience of other nations indicates that the healing process takes time. Thus, it will be imperative for Colombians to strike a balance between what constitutes sufficient punishment for the guilty and the need to move on to reconstruct the nation.

The FARC, as well as the ELN, claim to have an agenda for social justice at the negotiating table, including agrarian reform, income redistribution (in Colombia, the top 5 percent earn more than 30 times that earned by the bottom 5 percent), an end to fumigation intended to eradicate coca plants, and economic development aid for neglected areas of the country.<sup>47</sup> They also want security for their people once they put down their arms, fearing that unarmed they will be killed, as happened to former members of the M-19. They may also want political power, but would have to compete for it within the bounded uncertainty of democracy. In exchange, they would help get rid of drug trafficking. The United States supports the peace negotiations and hopes that if they develop a momentum of their own, they will eventually persuade enough fighters now outside the political process to reinsert themselves as productive members of society. The United States also insists that the FARC cut the umbilical cord to the drug business, something that would appear hard to do given the lucrative income the guerrillas receive from it. Indeed, the insurgents may be so corrupted by their involvement in the "war system" as to be unwilling to pursue the best agenda for the Colombian people: peace, democracy, and justice. If democracy and justice were truly to come about, the guerrillas would cease to exist. Military power rather than ideology appears to be the basis of their influence and continued existence.<sup>48</sup>

## **Conclusion.**

Colombia and the United States are at a strategic crossroads. The directions they take will help determine whether the principles of democracy and human decency survive in Colombia, and whether this major threat to regional security thrives and infects other societies with corruption and violence. This essay has set forth frameworks and strategic directions that should inform the debate on what is to be done. The responsibility lies with the people of Colombia to reconstruct their nation. The United States, the crucial outside actor, has indispensable experience, resources and political clout. The judicious application of principles that have worked in the past in other settings, including legitimate power, democratic participation, the commitment and resources of the populace, focused and restrained external assistance, and creative and sustained leadership, are the keys. There can be no turning back if Colombia is to avoid becoming a "failed state," at war with itself and the region.

## **ENDNOTES**

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